

LAOS

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U.S. uses Thai troops in Laos

By Richard E. Ward
Second of two articles

A rare secret session of the Senate was held at the request of Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.) June 7 to hear a report on U.S. clandestine activities in Laos. Following the session, Senators Symington and J.W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) openly charged that the use of Thai mercenaries, just admitted that same day by the State Department which calls them "volunteers," was violating congressional restrictions on U.S. operations in Laos.

Some details of the nearly 3½-hour closed door meeting were given in the June 8 Washington Post in an article by Spencer Rich who reported:

—Symington, who revealed that the administration wants \$374 million for military and economic programs in Laos for the 1972 fiscal year (a figure which does not include the \$2 billion estimated costs of bombing), said that he wanted the Senate to know the details of "the secret war" before appropriating funds for it.

—Of the request, \$120 million is said to be earmarked for funding CIA operations in Northern Laos, including the use of Meo mercenaries from Laos as well as at least 4800 Thai troops.

—A major issue in the secret debate centered upon whether the use of Thai forces was in contravention of the 1970 Fulbright amendment to the 1971 Defense Appropriations Act, signed into law by President Nixon Jan. 11 this year. The amendment barred use of Defense Department funds to support what the Pentagon calls "free world forces" in actions "designed to provide military support and assistance to the government of Cambodia or Laos."

—The massive bombing of Northern Laos, which has nothing to do with the movement of supplies from North Vietnam to the South or Cambodia, was questioned by several senators, including Fulbright and Clifford P. Case (R-N.J.).

Nixon the lawbreaker

After the Senate meeting, Rich reported that Symington stated: "My personal opinion is...that the law has been contravened. The amendment said you couldn't spend money to train and put people of foreign governments into Laos or into Cambodia." That was also Fulbright's view. State Department sources later said, according to Rich, "that the Thais being used aren't recruited on a government-to-government basis, but were individuals recruited from the borderside Thai population."

The Post report obviously left out many details of the Senate discussion, assuming the legislative body got a full account of U.S. activities. Symington's disclosures were based on a report by two staff members of his subcommittee of the Foreign Relations committee, James Lowenstein and Richard Morse, who had recently made an inquiry into Laos.

Reportedly the Symington subcommittee now has a relatively accurate account of U.S. activities in Laos that is more complete than was provided by the administration at secret hearings in October 1969, released after "security" deletions by the administration in April 1970. What might be called the battle of Laos in Washington, concerns the attempt by antiwar senators to get U.S. activities in Laos itself into the public record. Initially and perhaps still, some senators have been reacting against the administration's deception of themselves along with the public. However, the issue of Laos is now being put forward to oppose administration policy in Indochina as a whole because it so clearly reveals the White House aim of maintaining—if not expanding—the war. This point remains clouded during discussions focusing on Vietnam because troop withdrawals are still used by the supporters of U.S. aggression to obscure the actual aims of U.S. policy.

As has been previously noted by the Symington subcommittee, the lid of U.S. official secrecy conceals little that is not known by informed journalists or "the other side." Certainly the Pathet Lao knows what is happening in Laos. They are obviously fully aware of the bombings by the Air Force as well as the array of CIA programs. Although no reliable figure had been released on U.S. spending on its Laotian programs, the Pathet Lao accurately estimated it last summer as greater than \$300 million (again apart from bombing).

Number of Thai troops growing

Concerning the use of Thai troops, the Pathet Lao stated last year that they numbered about 1000 during the Johnson administration (a figure that has recently been corroborated in the press and by Sen. Fulbright) and that the increase in Thai forces was undertaken by Nixon. However, according to the Pathet Lao, the number of Thai troops now exceeds the 4800 figure used by Fulbright.

In April of this year, Prince Souphanouvong, head of the Lao Patriotic Front (Pathet Lao), charged that the number of Thai troops was being augmented by the U.S. Shortly after this, George W. Ashworth reported in the April 17 Christian Science Monitor: "Nixon administration officials have hammered out an agreement with the government of Thailand for sharply increased use of Thai forces in Laos."

Thai troops were previously used in the ill-fated U.S.-backed attempt to hold the Plain of Jars, which ended in an important Pathet Lao victory in February 1970. Presumably the losses then were an element leading to the more formalized agreement for use of Thai troops. Bangkok may relinquish some of its sovereignty to Washington, but not without a price.

Thai "volunteer" troops used in South Vietnam were given a bonus by the U.S. considerably augmenting their regular pay while Bangkok received military hardware and other considerations from the Johnson administration to agree to use of Thais in Vietnam. There is no reason to assume that Bangkok's price has gone down, more likely it is up. Confirming this, a Senate source has noted that the cost of the mercenaries was high. Symington on June 7 referred to both regular and irregular Thai troops being used in Laos, so it is possible that part of the deal with Bangkok involves freedom for the CIA to recruit directly in Thailand. Taking all evidence into account, Thai troops in Laos may now number 10,000 or higher.

Senators Symington and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) attacked administration activities in Laos in statements issued a day before the secret debate. Symington emphasized the administration furtiveness while Kennedy charged that U.S. military activities in Northern Laos lacked constitutional authority, which seemed to be implicitly saying that the U.S. was conducting a war against the Laotian people without a declaration of war or congressional authority.

Wide destruction

Among the facts to emerge from the recent congressional debate is the acceleration of U.S. bombing in Laos, or rather, of the liberated zone since the autumn of last year, and the increased use of B-52s, a plane whose bombing reaches the peak of indiscriminate destructiveness. The step-up in B-52 activity in Laos has largely coincided with the accelerated "protective reaction strikes" being carried out against North Vietnam, and it is quite possible that one of the real purposes of these attacks is an effort to prevent the DRV from utilizing its potent aerial defenses to assist their Laotian neighbors.

At the same time, the assumption of U.S. attacks in Laos have the dual purpose of opposing the Laotian revolution and of converting Laos into a strategic pawn for strangling the liberation forces in South Vietnam and in Cambodia. After White House strategist Henry Kissinger and the CIA last year mistakenly assumed that it would be a pushover to seize control of Cambodia, they apparently thought Laos was the "weak link" in Indochina. They could not have been more mistaken.

Although it is now generally understood in this country that the U.S.-Saigon invasion of Laos was a failure and even ended in a rout, the full significance of the defeat has not been widely understood because of the official lies and secrecy of Saigon and Washington, which still veil what happened. Again this furtiveness is an effort to minimize the domestic political repercussions of the defeat in the U.S. as well as in South Vietnam, rather than trying to conceal what the "other side" already knows.

"Operation Lam Son 719," which began as an effort to create a "cordon sanitaire" across Laos, was forced back and defeated before it achieved its first target, Tchepone, about one-seventh of the way across Laos. Contrary to U.S. and Saigon propaganda about the capture of Tchepone, which only lasted a few days even according to the propaganda, the town was never really taken and the nearest point held, and that only briefly, was firebase "Sophia," some 2½ miles away.

Pathet Lao victory

In an interview given to the Swedish journalist Erik Eriksson of Aftonbladet, Prince Souphanouvong said on March 29 that the U.S.-Saigon setback in Southern Laos was "the biggest victory ever known in the history of the Lao people's resistance to imperialist aggression." Clearly, that is no exaggeration in light of the magnitude of the invading force that was defeated and the overall U.S. strategy in Laos and Indochina which was frustrated.

The defeat of "Lam Son 719" had a wider significance than proving the strength of the Laotian resistance. The military campaign gave the severest test to date to the coordination and mutual assistance between the resistance in Laos and Vietnam; this too endured more solidly than U.S. strategists ever expected. Finally, the operation has had major political ramifications in the U.S. In his interview with Eriksson, Souphanouvong also stated:

"...There is no doubt that our great victory in Southern Laos will affect the political situation in the U.S., and strongly stimulate the progressive forces in the U.S. to stand up against the policy of war and aggression pursued by the Nixon administration and to demand Nixon to quickly get American troops out of the Indochina war."

That cautious prediction, made while the administration was still congratulating itself on the lack of political fallout from its Laotian debacle, is now fully borne out and even exceeded as the demand for complete U.S. withdrawal, stimulated by the events

in Laos, has gone beyond even progressive forces.

Because of the blow dealt to "Vietnamization" by the defeat of "Lam Son 719," it was no coincidence that the Nixon administration concluded its agreement for increased use of Thai troops just when Saigon proved it would be a slender reed in Laos. Perhaps Washington is beginning to understand the political liability of using South Vietnam forces and therefore is turning to Thailand where the revolutionary process is less advanced. However, Thai troops are not battle-experienced and they are unlikely to provide an effective prop for the sagging pro-U.S. elements in Laos.

The magnitude of the U.S.-Saigon setback in February and March has in part obscured subsequent Pathet Lao victories. On Route 9, the liberation forces not only repelled the invasion forces east of Tchepone but also advanced to the west, first taking Muong Phalane and then Dong Hene, 45 and 70 miles west of Tchepone respectively. To the south of Route 9, the liberation of the Bolovens plateau, which contained important CIA bases for directing attacks against the liberated zone, was completed last month.

Thus, despite the U.S. bombing, which Prince Souphanouvong has described as exceeding the equivalent of a Hiroshima-size nuclear bomb each week in Laos, 1971 has been a year of unprecedented Pathet Lao victories.